HISTORY · LINGUISTICS · GENETICS — A RESEARCH STUDY

KURUKH

CHILDREN OF THE DECCAN, HEIRS OF THE PLATEAU

The origin, migration, history, and cultural identity of the Oraon people — a lineage traced from the First Indians of the Indus Valley, through the fields of the Deccan, to the fallen fortress of Rohtasgarh and the thrones of Jashpur: one people's four-thousand-year walk into the present.

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I. The People of the Plateau

Who the Oraon are, and where they live

Long before any archive gave them a page, the Oraon were already a people with a name of their own choosing. They call themselves **Kurukh** — and their language, too, is Kurukh, a tongue that belongs not to the Austroasiatic Munda family that surrounds them in the forests of the Chhotanagpur plateau, but to the distant Dravidian family, whose other children speak Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada far to the south.

Where They Live

The heartland of the Oraon today spreads across Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal, and Assam, with meaningful populations also settled in Madhya Pradesh and Tripura. Over generations of colonial-era labour migration, Oraon families also carried their songs and their gods to the tea gardens of Assam and West Bengal, and even as far as the Andaman Islands.

Clans and Self-Rule

Oraon society is organised into exogamous clans, locally called *khilli* — Toppo, Lakra, Minz, Kispotta, and many others — each named for a plant, animal, or natural object, and marriage within one's own clan is forbidden. Governance, historically, rested not with kings but with the community itself, through the **Padha Panchayat**, a self-rule system that bound villages together, settled disputes, and preserved social order without recourse to a throne.

Festivals, Dance, and the Rhythm of the Year

- **Sarhul** — the great nature-festival of spring, celebrated when the sal trees bloom.
- **Karma** — a festival bound up with the love between brother and sister and with the abundance of nature.
- **Jhumar** — the traditional dance, and the folk songs that travel with it, form the living, breathing core of Oraon culture.

Livelihood, Then and Now

The Oraon have always been, at heart, an agricultural people, with paddy cultivation forming the backbone of their livelihood. Alongside farming, the forest itself has long provided: mahua, tendu leaves, and other minor

forest produce supplement the household economy. Modernisation and the spread of education have, in recent generations, carried many Oraon into government service, industry, and the wider urban world.

Language and Letters

Kurukh, a major Dravidian language, is today written in the **Tolong Siki** script — though Devanagari and Roman scripts remain in wide use. The oral tradition is extraordinarily rich: folk tales, riddles, and songs that map the many dimensions of life have been carried, mouth to mouth, across centuries.

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II. The Clans and Their Totems

The gotra system — sixty-eight names, and the living creatures behind them

Ask an Oraon their gotra, and you are not asking for a surname. You are asking which wild creature, which tree, which river, or which quiet mineral first stood beside their ancestors in a moment of need — and has stood as kin to their family ever since. A man named Kerketta will not harm a sparrow. A woman of the Minj clan will not eat the Minj fish. A household bearing the name Bara removes the crown of a ber fruit before eating it, out of old habit no one now remembers starting. This is the gotra, or *khilli*, system — and it is, perhaps, the single deepest thread holding Oraon identity together across geography, migration, and time.

What a Gotra Is, and Why It Matters

In the social structure of the Oraon tribe, the gotra — or totem — system plays a foundational role. Each Oraon family traces its lineage back through its ancestors to one particular gotra, and every family sharing that gotra is regarded as descended from the same original family — in effect, as siblings, however distant the actual blood relation. Ethnographers estimate that there are somewhere between **60 and 68 such totemic clans** among the Oraon, most of them named after an animal, bird, fish, plant, tree, or mineral drawn from the world immediately around their ancestors.

Crucially, the Oraon do not believe they are literally descended *from* the totem creature itself. Rather, they hold that the members of a particular clan descend from a shared human ancestor, and that the totem — the animal, plant, or object bound to that ancestor's memory — is honoured because it once helped the family through a moment of hardship. Each gotra carries its own such legend, passed down for generations.

The Rule of Exogamy

The gotra system governs marriage above all else. Since members of the same gotra are considered siblings by descent, marriage within one's own gotra — or to a first cousin on the mother's side — is treated as incest, and is firmly forbidden. A person must marry outside their own clan, though strictly within the wider Oraon community: this is **clan exogamy combined with tribal endogamy**. Under the growing, all-pervading influence of Hinduism and Christianity in recent generations, the gotra system's grip on marriage arrangements has loosened somewhat — but the underlying taboo against marrying within one's own clan remains deeply respected.

The Khunt and Parha Systems — Lineage and Local Governance

Beneath the gotra sits a second, more local layer of organisation. The major lineage grouping is known as the **Bhuinhari Khunt** — "Bhuinhari" meaning, roughly, "owner of the land." This Khunt in turn divides into two principal branches: the **Pahan Khunt**, associated with the village's priestly office, and the **Mahto Khunt**, associated with its secular or administrative office. In villages first settled by Oraon families, the population was traditionally divided into three such branches — Munda, Pahan, and Mahto — the founders of each branch held to have been sons of the village's first settler.

Above the village level sits the **Parha Panchayat**, the confederated council structure already introduced earlier in this account. Some twelve to thirty villages combine to form a single Parha. Within that Parha, individual villages are ranked by traditional office: one is the *Raja* (king) village, whose headman presides over the whole council; another is the *Dewan* (minister) village; another the *Panrey* (clerk) village; a fourth the *Kotwar* (orderly) village; and the remainder are *Praja* (subject) villages. This structure — a rotating, title-bearing confederation of villages rather than a hereditary monarchy — is, as earlier chapters have noted, one of the clearest expressions of the Oraon's historic preference for decentralised, consensus-based governance over centralised royal authority.

The Legends Behind the Totems

Each totem is protected by a specific taboo, and many are anchored to a remembered legend. Field research published in the *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge* records several of these directly from Oraon oral testimony:

- **Xalxo (a shad-like fish):** the legend holds that an Oraon ancestor was once fishing in a stream when a Xalxo fish, caught in his net, managed to escape. From that day forward, the Xalxo fish became taboo to him and to all his descendants.
- **Minj (an eel):** families of the Minj clan never hunt or eat the Minj fish, honouring the same principle of totemic kinship.

- **Nag (the cobra):** the Nag clan protects the cobra and will not hunt it, treating the serpent as an ancestral guardian rather than a threat.
- **Toppo (a long-tailed bird):** the Toppo clan abstains entirely from hunting or eating its totem bird.

Members of a gotra do not merely avoid harming their totem — they actively protect it. The hunting of the totem animal, or the felling of the totem tree, is strictly prohibited among members of the corresponding clan, and popular Oraon belief holds that each totem carries a quiet, positive power that helps its family members in times of need. During the *Jatra* festival, Oraon families have historically carried flags bearing the symbol of their own gotra — a visible, communal display of an otherwise private inheritance.

The Full Register of Gotras

What follows is a consolidated register, drawn from multiple ethnographic sources — including the early colonial surveys of E. T. Dalton, the foundational tribal ethnography of S. C. Roy, and community-maintained clan registries still circulated among the Oraon today. Spellings vary between sources, since Kurukh has historically been transliterated inconsistently into Devanagari and Roman scripts alike; where sources disagree on a totem's precise meaning, both are given.

Bird Totems

Gotra	Totem / Meaning
Kerketta	Quail, or hedge-sparrow / small bird
Toppo	Woodpecker, or long-tailed bird
Tirkey	A small bird, or young mouse
Xaxa / Khakha	Crow
Kokro / Cockro	Domestic cock
Bakula / Dhichuwa	Crane, or paddy-bird / small black bird
Gende / Gadi (bird sense)	Duck
Gidhi / Rawna / Gidh / Kannhar	Vulture
Orgora / Oregora	Hawk or kite
Dhechua / Dhehua / Chelekchela	A swallow-tailed bird
Gisileeh / Gislehi	A specific bird species
Beshra	A named bird species

Kuhu	Cuckoo
Tirkuaar / Tirkumar	A bird species
Garwa / Gariwa	Stork (Saras)

Animal Totems

Gotra	Totem / Meaning
Lakra	Tiger (in some sources, cheetah)
Tigga	Monkey, or field rat
Gadi / Gari	Monkey
Halman / Halmaan	Baboon, or large monkey
Hartu	Hanuman langur
Aadho / Addo	Ox or cow
Alla	Dog
Bando	Wild cat
Barwa / Banoar / Khoiya	Wild dog
Baghwar	Tiger
Chilgo / Ckigalo	Fox or jackal
Chermanko	An animal, rat-like
Sanda / Runda	Fox
Kish	Pig
Chindra / Chidra	Squirrel
Argo / Osga / Oruga / Airgo	Field-rat or mouse
Nag	Cobra (protected, not hunted)

Fish and Aquatic Totems

Gotra	Totem / Meaning

Xalxo	Shad fish (see legend above)
Minz / Minj	Eel
Aind	A snake-like fish
Ekka / Kachhap	Tortoise
Kindo / Kinduar / Kusuar / Kusua	Carp, or fish species generally
Khalkho	Fish
Lita / Saal / Tiru / Linda	Fish species
Godo / Gonddo	Crocodile
Biaah	Fish
Kane / Keoonda	Fish, or a fruit (sources vary)

Plant, Tree, and Vegetable Totems

Gotra	Totem / Meaning
Kujur	A climbing plant, or a fruit
Bara / Barla	Banyan tree (Ficus)
Madgi	Mahua tree
Pusra	Kusum tree
Kanda	Sweet potato or root
Kaithi / Kaitha	A curry vegetable
Kundri / Kunduri	A curry vegetable
Kispotta / Kish Khochol	A thorny tree — literally "hog's bone"
Bakla / Baxla	Grass, or tank-weed
Chitkha	Ficus religiosa (the peepal tree)
Gondobari / Gondarari	A tree species
Putri / Rori	Tree species
Angal Topo	A type of tree

Mineral, Elemental, and Object Totems

Gotra	Totem / Meaning
Panna	Iron
Bekh / Beck	Salt
Binko	Star
Amri / Amdi	Rice-water, or juice extracted from rice
Khes	Paddy / rice
Baandh	A dam built to hold back river water
Jubbi	A source of water
Son	The Son river
Kinda	Coconut

Occupational, Devotional, and Other Exogamous Names

Name	Note
Dhanwar / Dhangar	"Domestic worker" or labourer — also a broader community name for the Oraon as a whole
Bhagat	Title of a Kurukh priest; also adopted in place of a gotra by followers of the Tana Bhagat reform movement and Sarna Dharma
Oroan	Used by some simply as the caste name itself, in place of an ancestral gotra
Ram, Devi, Say, Nikunj	Exogamous names adopted in some regions, particularly in Chhattisgarh, in place of a traditional gotra

A small number of recorded septs — among them Indwar, Dadel, Niya, Munjni, and Kashyap — appear consistently across sources as genuine Oraon gotras, but without a totemic meaning surviving in the available ethnographic record.

> One correspondent, recalling his grandfather's teaching, notes that members of the Bara gotra observe the custom of removing the crown of a ber fruit before eating it, while those bearing the name Kerketta are forbidden from killing a sparrow — small, private rituals of respect that persist in individual families long after the wider clan system has faded from public life.

A System Under Pressure

Like much else in Oraon social life, the gotra system has come under sustained pressure from the same forces of religious conversion and cultural change described elsewhere in this account. As Hindu and Christian identities have taken deeper root among Oraon families, many now record "Oraon" itself, or a chosen devotional name such as Bhagat, Ram, or Devi, in place of an ancestral totemic gotra — particularly on official documents and in regions such as Chhattisgarh. Even so, the underlying taboo against marrying within one's own clan, and the quiet private customs tied to individual totems, have proven remarkably durable, persisting in family memory even where the formal vocabulary of the gotra system itself has begun to fade.

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III. The Quest for Origin

Where the Oraon truly came from — and how we know

There is a question that sits underneath every Oraon lullaby and every clan name: who are these people, really, and where did they come from before memory began? The search for an answer runs along three parallel roads — the ancient migration story carried in songs, the evidence buried inside language itself, and, more recently, the evidence written into DNA.

A Southern Cradle

Oral tradition and linguistics together point toward South India — most likely the Deccan region — as the original homeland of the Oraon ancestors. Linguistically they belong to the Dravidian family, even though most of the tribal groups around them in Jharkhand belong instead to the Austroasiatic (Munda) family — a striking anomaly that only migration can explain.

The Long Walk North

According to tradition, in ancient times these ancestors pushed toward North or Central India, crossing many halting-points along the way. Among these, the fort of **Rohtasgarh** in Bihar stands as one of the most important historical sites in Oraon memory — the place from which, after Muslim-era conquests, they were forced to take refuge in the forests and plateaus of Chhotanagpur.

> **Key research threads worth following further:** linguistics, genetic-mapping reports, and the regional historical documents of Chhotanagpur — each opens a different door into the same house.

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IV. What the Tongue Remembers

Linguistics as a witness that cannot lie

Languages do not lie. They are history's most faithful strongbox — and when scholars pry open the grammar of Kurukh, they find inside it a memory older than any king's edict.

North versus South: A Paradox of Geography

Most tribal languages of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and central India belong to the Austroasiatic (Munda) family or to Indo-Aryan. Kurukh, in sharp contrast, belongs directly to the Dravidian family — but not to its southern branch. It sits instead in the **North Dravidian branch**, alongside two sister tongues:

- **Malto / Sauria Paharia** — spoken in the Santhal Pargana region of Jharkhand.
- **Brahui** — spoken far away in Balochistan, Pakistan.

This chain — Brahui, Kurukh, Malto, stretched from Balochistan to Jharkhand — leads linguists to a striking conclusion: in ancient times, Dravidian-speaking communities were spread across a much wider swath of North and Central India than they occupy today. Before the decline of the Indus Valley Civilisation, or before the arrival of Indo-Aryan speakers, Kurukh-speaking groups may have occupied vast tracts of land across the north.

Grammar as Fossil Record

- **Agglutinative structure** — like Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada, Kurukh builds grammatical meaning by attaching suffixes to a root word.
- **Rational vs. Irrational gender** — nouns are divided into "rational" (humans/deities) and "irrational" (animals and inanimate objects), a hallmark feature of ancient Dravidian grammar systems.
- **Inclusive and exclusive "we"** — Kurukh distinguishes *nām* ("we", including the listener) from *ēm* ("we", excluding the listener) — a complex social-linguistic feature preserved only in very ancient societies.

Linguistic Fossils in Folk Memory

Oraon oral tales carry references to the Deccan, the Narmada valley, and finally Rohtasgarh in Bihar. Kurukh

vocabulary tied to agriculture, nature, forests, and seasons is often entirely distinct from neighbouring Munda languages, yet matches the proto-forms of ancient Tamil or Kannada — academic proof that, even after centuries of contact and co-existence with other communities, the Oraon preserved their core linguistic DNA.

What's in a Name: Oraon Versus Kurukh

It is worth pausing on a small but telling linguistic fact that runs through this entire book: "Oraon" is not, strictly, what this community calls itself. According to the colonial ethnographer Edward Tuite Dalton, "Oraon" is an *exonym* — a name given by outsiders, specifically by the neighbouring Munda people, said to mean simply "to roam" or "wanderer." The community's own name for itself, in its own language, is **Kurukh**. The linguist Sten Konow offered a further layer to this puzzle: in Kurukh itself, the words *urapai*, *urapo*, and *urang* all mean, simply, "man" or "person" — suggesting that even the exonym "Oraon" may ultimately trace back to a Kurukh word for "human being" rather than to any pejorative sense of wandering. As for "Kurukh" itself, Konow proposed it may derive from *kur* or *kurcana*, meaning "to shout" or "to stammer" — making "Kurukh," in this reading, something close to "a speaker" or "one who speaks aloud": a people who name themselves, quite literally, by their own voice.

How Many Speak It Today

Kurukh is classified by UNESCO as a **"vulnerable" language** on its list of the world's endangered languages — spoken by a large population in absolute terms, but under sustained pressure from Hindi, regional state languages, and English in education and public life. A related dialect, **Kisan** Kurukh, spoken by communities who identify occupationally as "Kisan" (cultivator) rather than by the tribal name Oraon, was recorded with 206,100 speakers as of the 2011 census — a reminder that Kurukh survives today not as one uniform tongue but as a family of closely related dialects spread across several states and, in a small pocket, even into Nepal, where a related variety is sometimes called Dhangar Kurukh, the only Dravidian language spoken anywhere in that country.

The Script Reclaimed

For a long time Kurukh was written only orally, or borrowed the Devanagari or Roman scripts. To reclaim a lost identity and an independent cultural existence, the **Tolong Siki** script was developed — giving a new direction to the community's literary and historical rediscovery. The script's modern form is credited to **Narayan Oraon**, who developed it in the late 1990s; on **14 October 2006**, the **Kurukh Literary Society** was founded specifically to promote the script and to encourage its use in publishing, education, and everyday written communication. The effort to build an institutional home for the language did not stop there: in **1981**, Ranchi University opened a dedicated Tribal and Regional Language department, offering study of Kurukh (alongside Mundari, Santali, Kharia, and Ho) from the intermediate level through postgraduate study

— training, for the first time, a generation of Kurukh-speaking scholars, poets, and prose writers working in their own written language rather than only in Hindi or English.

Following Kurukh and Malto Backward

Digging deeper into North Dravidian languages carries us toward one of the subcontinent's most ancient and startling histories.

1. **Classification:** Kurukh, Malto, and Brahui are not separate branches that split off on the same day — all three descend from a shared **Proto-North-Dravidian** parent tongue that later scattered in different directions.
2. **Going further back — Proto-Dravidian:** according to linguists and archaeologists (among them Franklin Southworth and Andrew Kinnersley Kanisetti), Proto-Dravidian speakers lived roughly 4,000–4,500 years ago in and around the Krishna-Godavari valley (present-day northern Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh). Reconstructed vocabulary points to communities built around dry deciduous forests, farming, goat-and-sheep herding, and early village settlements.
3. **Before arriving in India — the Indus Valley connection:** a strong body of scholarship (Asko Parpola and others) holds that the builders of the Indus Valley Civilisation were themselves speakers of an ancient Dravidian, or Proto-Dravidian-equivalent, language. When the IVC's reach extended across north-western India, Pakistan, and western Uttar Pradesh, the whole of north and central India lay within this language family's zone of influence.

The Split After the Fall

When the Indus civilisation declined, or when Indo-Aryan speakers arrived in the north, this once-unified group split in two:

- One branch moved west into the hills of Balochistan — surviving today as **Brahui**.
- The larger branch spread toward central India, Jharkhand, and eastern India's forests and plateaus — becoming, in time, the **Kurukh (Oraon)** and **Malto (Paharia)**.

Before reaching Jharkhand's Chhotanagpur plateau or Rohtasgarh in Bihar, the ancestors of Kurukh and Malto lingered long in central India — the Narmada valley, and the forests of the Vindhya and Satpura ranges — where they came into contact first with the pre-existing Austroasiatic (Munda) peoples, and later with incoming Indo-Aryan speakers. This long contact is why Kurukh and Malto grammar today contains local words and sounds absent from southern Tamil or Kannada, fully shaped instead by the Central and Eastern Indian environment.

> In short: the ancient forebears of Kurukh and Malto are none other than remnants of that same ancient

South Indian / Indus-era Proto-Dravidian migratory chain, which drifted north and toward central India many centuries ago.

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V. Kisan, Dhangar, and the Farmer's Name

Regional and occupational names of the same people

Call the same man "Oraon," call him "Kisan," call him "Dhangar" — three names, one soil, one people. The names shifted with the census-taker and the region, but the hands on the plough and the tie to the land never did. The Oraon community's connection to the identities "Kisan" and "Dhangar/Dhangad" runs deep.

- **"Kisan" and "Dhangad/Dhangar":** in states like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, Oraon people are, at the local level, often also called "Kisan" or "Dhangad."
- **Meaning of the name:** "Dhangad" or "Dhankad" is generally tied to agricultural labour, farmhand work, or a farming way of life. Since the Oraon community has, at its root, always been a skilled farming and land-tied society, administrative and local records have also referred to them by these names.
- **The importance of paddy in clan names:** among Oraon traditional clans (khilli) are names such as "Dheshwar," tied to paddy and farming, and even a clan called "Xess," connected to rice.

A Working Vocabulary of Occupation, Not Caste

Colonial-era ethnography records that, although the Oraon recognise no internal subcaste hierarchy in the manner of caste Hindu society, two occupationally defined groups did tend, in practice, toward marrying among themselves: the **Kisan** ("cultivators") and the **Kuda** ("navvies," or earthwork labourers) — a soft, practical distinction of trade rather than a rigid ritual hierarchy, and one that in no way overrode the deeper, tribe-wide rule of gotra exogamy discussed in the previous chapter. In the tea gardens of Assam and Bengal, and in the colonial plantation economies of Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago, indentured Oraon and other Chhotanagpur tribal labourers were, during the nineteenth century, collectively administered under the label "**Hill Coolies**" — a colonial-era occupational category, now obsolete and, like many such terms, carrying the weight of the exploitative indenture system it described, but one that nonetheless left "Dhangar" as a surviving self-identifier among many of these diaspora communities to this day.

A note of disambiguation: readers researching "Dhangar" elsewhere in Indian ethnography should take care

not to conflate the Oraon/Dhangar identity discussed here with the entirely unrelated **Dhangar shepherd-caste community of Maharashtra**, a large pastoral caste with no Dravidian or Chhotanagpur tribal connection. The two communities share a name by historical coincidence of occupation-based naming conventions, not by common ancestry.

Kurukh (Oraon), Kisan, and Dhangad/Dhankad are, at root, different regional or occupational names for one and the same culture and people — names that reflect their fundamentally agrarian identity, carried from the paddy fields of Chhotanagpur to the tea gardens of Assam and onward across the Oraon diaspora that today spans four continents.

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VI. The Blood Trail, and the Cousins It Reveals

What DNA and anthropology tell us — and where Oraon ancestry connects across the subcontinent

Where language and blood tell the same story, history becomes almost undeniable. But where they diverge, the divergence itself becomes the most fascinating clue of all — and nowhere in this entire account does that divergence run deeper, or matter more, than in the genetic record of the Oraon people.

A Genomic Profile

Population-genetics research shows that Indian tribal populations carry a mixture of ancient South Indian (ASI — Ancestral South Indian) and ancient North Indian genetic components. Studies of maternal (mtDNA) and paternal (Y-DNA) markers on the Oraon show their genetic roots run deep into the subcontinent's original ancient inhabitants. Though the language is Dravidian, centuries of intermixing with local tribes has meant the Oraon gene pool has blended considerably with other tribes of central and eastern India.

The modern scientific framework for understanding this traces back to a landmark 2009 study in *Nature*, "Reconstructing Indian Population History," led by David Reich, Kumarasamy Thangaraj, and colleagues, which first proposed that virtually all present-day Indian populations descend from a mixture of two ancient, genetically distinct groups: **Ancestral North Indians (ANI)**, related to Central Asian and West Eurasian populations, and **Ancestral South Indians (ASI)**, a lineage found nowhere outside the subcontinent. A decade later, a much larger 2019 study in *Science*, "The Genomic Formation of South and Central Asia" (Narasimhan, Reich, and a large international consortium), refined this picture further, identifying the ASI component itself as a mixture of an even older population — now called **AASI, or Ancient Ancestral South**

Indian — with genetic input from early Iranian-related farming populations linked to the agricultural revolution. It is this AASI layer, the deepest and oldest in the entire Indian genetic record, that sits at the heart of Oraon ancestry.

What the Y-Chromosome and Mitochondrial DNA Show

Beyond the broad ANI-ASI-AASI framework, more targeted studies of paternal (Y-DNA) and maternal (mtDNA) lineages among Indian tribal populations — including work associated with the Anthropological Survey of India and the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad — have consistently found Chhotanagpur-region tribal populations, Oraon included, to carry a high frequency of deep, subcontinent-specific mitochondrial lineages (haplogroups within the broader M and U2 families common to South Asia) alongside paternal lineages that likewise trace to very old South Asian branches, rather than to the more recently arrived Central Asian paternal lineages that are comparatively common among northern Indo-Aryan-speaking populations. Taken together, maternal and paternal lines alike point the same direction: toward deep continuity with the subcontinent's earliest settlers, not toward a recent arrival from any single outside source.

Nearest Genetic Kin

Group	Nature of Connection
Malto / Sauria Paharia	Closest relatives — both are the two surviving ends of the North Dravidian family, sharing common ancestry that split apart during migration. Their shared genetic history confirms both descend from the same original ancestors, separated only during the final stages of the journey described in earlier chapters.
Gond and other South-Central Indian tribes	Genetic components overlap considerably with Gond and other tribal groups, owing to shared ancient South Indian (ASI/AASI) ancestry and centuries of subsequent contact across the central Indian plateau belt.
Irula, Kurumba, Paniya (Nilgiri tribes, South India)	Genetic distance places the Oraon close to this cluster of ancient hunter-gatherer tribes — proof that their fundamental genetic roots connect to South India's ancient hunter-gatherers and original inhabitants, the same population from which the Oraon's own AASI component ultimately derives.
Bhil and other Central/Western Indian tribes	Some genetic-distance matrices show partial clustering, reflecting centuries of shared life and intermarriage across the central Indian plateau belt, rather than a single shared migratory origin.
Brahui (Pakistan)	Linguistically the closest sister tongue — Brahui belongs, like Kurukh and Malto, to the North Dravidian family. Genetically, however, the overlap is small or negligible: Brahui speakers carry heavy West-Eurasian/Balochi admixture, while the Oraon remain firmly within the South Asian AASI-and-indigenous gene pool. Language and genes, here, followed entirely different roads after splitting from the same root — thousands of years of separate geographic history left both groups

	blended with entirely different neighbouring populations.

Going Deeper: ASI and AASI

When the trail of Irula and other South Indian ancient tribes is traced, it surfaces as the **ASI (Ancestral South Indian)** cluster — the shared genetic base uniting the Oraon with these southern tribes as descendants of the same original Indian population. Push further back still, and genetics arrives at **AASI (Ancient Ancestral South Indian)**, also called "First Indians" — the original population that settled the subcontinent after the last ice age, and the source of the purest, highest AASI proportions found among both the Nilgiri tribes and the ancient base of the Oraon.

The Out-of-Africa Thread

At the furthest and oldest layer of this ancestry lies the shared human story: roughly 50,000 to 65,000 years ago, modern humans (Homo sapiens) left Africa and reached the Indian subcontinent along its coastal routes. These groups then developed, over millennia, fully adapted to the geography of forests, plateaus, and river valleys — and simply stayed. Genetically, this makes the AASI lineage one of the oldest continuously present human populations anywhere outside Africa — older, in strict genetic terms, than the population movements that later brought Indo-Aryan-speaking Steppe pastoralists into the subcontinent, and older still than the Iranian-related farming populations associated with the Indus Valley Civilisation.

How Much AASI, Compared to Others?

Population	Approx. AASI proportion
Oraon and neighbouring Central-Indian/Chhotanagpur tribes (Munda, Gond)	~50–60%
Highly isolated South Indian tribes (Irula, Paniya, Chenchu)	~70–80% (highest recorded)
General/upper castes of North India (UP, Bihar, Punjab)	~20–40%, with higher Steppe and Iranian-farmer components
Other Central-Indian tribes (Gond, Birhor, Munda)	Roughly comparable to the Oraon, reflecting a shared regional history

These figures are approximate, drawn from popular-science summaries of the underlying population-genetics literature rather than quoted directly from any single peer-reviewed source; precise percentages vary between studies, sample sets, and statistical models. Readers with a serious interest in the exact figures should consult the Reich (2009) and Narasimhan (2019) papers, and subsequent work citing them, directly.

The Unique Blend

1. **Strong AASI base (~50–60%)** — ties the Oraon to India's original inhabitants.
2. **Iranian-farmer / IVC-related component (~30–40%)** — supports the idea that their roots connect to the ancient north-west/Indus Valley or a central-Indian migratory chain.
3. **Negligible Steppe (Central Asian) component** — proof that the later large-scale Central Asian migration that reshaped much of North India left almost no mark here, leaving the community's ancient tribal and genetic structure protected.

Language and DNA: A Beautiful Paradox

Here lies one of history's most elegant contradictions. In **language**, Kurukh's North Dravidian threads connect both westward (Indus Valley/Balochistan) and southward (the Deccan). In **DNA**, however, going back far enough dissolves the boundaries of language altogether — the Oraon genetic line merges directly into the same ancient shared pool (AASI) from which the Irula and Kurumba of the south also arose. A Kurukh speaker in Jashpur and a Tamil-speaking Irula tribesman in the Nilgiri hills, separated by well over a thousand kilometres and by a language boundary older than recorded history, are, in this deepest genetic sense, closer cousins to one another than either is to most of their immediate non-tribal neighbours.

Cousins Across the Subcontinent — A Closer Look, Group by Group

The table above summarises the picture; it is worth pausing on each of these relationships individually, since each tells its own part of the story.

1. Malto / Sauria Paharia

Just as in linguistics, genetically too the Oraon's closest relatives are the Malto (or Sauria Paharia), who live in the Rajmahal Hills of Jharkhand — the very branch, as the migration chapter recounts, that split away from the main Oraon line at or near Rohtasgarh itself. Both are the two ends of the "North Dravidian" language family, and their shared genetic history confirms that both are descendants of the same original ancestors, separated during migration by a distance of perhaps only a few generations and a few hundred kilometres.

2. Gond and Other South-Central Indian Tribes

Global and Indian demographic DNA mapping (admixture analysis) shows that the Oraon's genetic component overlaps considerably with the major Dravidian-speaking tribe "Gond" of central India, and with some tribal groups of South India. Due to historical migration from south to central India, ancient South Indian (ASI/AASI) components dominate their DNA — the Gond, notably, took a broadly similar southern

route northward across the centuries, even though their own language belongs to the South-Central Dravidian branch rather than Kurukh's North Dravidian one.

3. Ancient Tribes of South India (Irula, Kurumba, and Paniya)

Early and modern studies of anthropology and blood markers/genetic distance find that the Oraon's genetic distance sits close to the cluster of ancient tribes of South India's Nilgiri region, such as Irula and Kurumba — proof that their fundamental genetic roots connect to South India's ancient hunter-gatherers and original inhabitants, communities that, unlike the Oraon, never left the Deccan at all and so preserve an even higher, less diluted AASI signature today.

4. Tribes of Central and Western India (Bhil and Others)

Some genetic-distance matrices also show that a portion of the Oraon genetic cluster matches with major tribes of central and western India, such as the Bhils — reflecting gene flow from centuries of shared life across the central Indian plateau region during the long middle phase of the migration, rather than any single shared migratory origin.

The Brahui Puzzle, Revisited

Linguistically, Brahui, spoken in Balochistan, Pakistan, also belongs to the North Dravidian family (sister language to Kurukh and Malto). But when DNA is matched, modern genetic studies show that direct genetic overlap between the Oraon and Brahui is very small or negligible. Brahui people's DNA carries heavy West-Eurasian (Balochi) admixture, while the Oraon remain firmly rooted within the South Asian gene pool (AASI plus indigenous components). This means the language came from the same "root," but thousands of years of geographic separation led both groups to adopt entirely separate genetic paths while mixing with local populations — Brahui speakers with the West Eurasian populations of Balochistan, and the Oraon with the tribal and rural populations of central and eastern India.

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PART TWO · FAITH AND NAME

VII. The Making of a People, and their God

How the Kurukh identity took shape, and the philosophy of Dharmesh

Every morning, as the first light climbs over the Chhotanagpur plateau, somewhere an old Pahan steps out of his hut and folds his hands toward the rising sun — not because the sun itself is a god, but because it is the visible face of Dharmesh, the formless power his ancestors have honoured since before any written record began. On that quiet daily gesture rests an entire identity: a people who trace themselves not to a single homeland or a single century, but to displacement endured, land re-settled, and belief carried faithfully across every mile of the journey.

Forging a Distinct People

A distinct and independent people is never the product of one place or one era alone — it is the outcome of displacement, struggle, and cultural resolve.

- **Root identity of language and name:** in their own tradition, "Kurukh" is bound to the idea of "human being" or "people of our own community." As they were displaced from South India or the Indus regions and arrived in central India and the Chhotanagpur plateau, they preserved their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness amid the local landscape — particularly among the Munda and other tribal neighbours.
- **The Padha Panchayat system of governance:** to keep their identity intact, they developed a strong political and social apparatus — the Padha Panchayat — which bound villages together and held the whole community as one thread in times of crisis.
- **Historical struggle and solidarity:** after the fall of Rohtasgarh, when refuge had to be taken in forests and hills, this very struggle strengthened their collective consciousness. Holding fast to their traditions, clan system (khilli), and agricultural culture, they established themselves as a distinct community.

Dharmesh — History and Philosophy

In Oraon religion and philosophy, **Dharmesh** is the supreme power, whose history and character are bound to nature, justice, and cosmic balance.

- **Supreme creator:** Dharmesh is believed to be the creator of the universe, nature, and all living beings — never bound to an idol or a form, but formless and omnipresent.

- **Connection to the sun (Biri):** Dharmesh's symbolic presence is tied to the sun, since the sun is the foundation of all life, warmth, and agriculture — making it a symbol of truth, justice, and light in Oraon culture.
- **The purity of white:** in the worship and rituals of Dharmesh, purity is paramount — only white offerings (white chicken, white goat, white flowers, or milk) are made, symbolising that Dharmesh is supremely pure and without blemish.
- **The creation myth:** Oraon folklore holds a long tale of Dharmesh creating the world — how he brought earth up from beneath the water to fashion the land ("sat-pati-raj"), and how he shaped humans and other living beings.

In short, Dharmesh is not merely a deity but, in Oraon philosophy, the guardian of moral order — ensuring that humanity walks in balance with nature and on the path of justice.

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VIII. Names Older Than Memory

Two open questions: was Dharmesh once a king? and where does "Kurukh" truly come from?

Some names are so old that even the people who carry them can no longer say, with certainty, where they began. "Dharmesh" and "Kurukh" are two such words — spoken daily by the Oraon for centuries, yet never fully surrendering the mystery folded inside them. Was some forgotten king or hero once remembered in these syllables? Let us follow both threads as far back as they will lead.

Was Dharmesh a Historical Leader or King?

Divinity, not a human hero: Oraon tradition and religious philosophy are clear that Dharmesh is not a historical man or king, but purely the Supreme Being — Creator.

Etymology: the word "Dharmesh" appears to be formed from the Sanskrit/Aryan word *dharma* combined with the Dravidian/Oraon suffix "-esh" (in the sense of "lord" or "master"). For centuries, Oraon society has treated nature, truth, and moral law as the very foundation of life — calling this "dharma," and its ruler "Dharmesh."

A possible historical overlay: as Kurukh-speaking people came into contact with various cultures and languages of central and north India — particularly Aryan and Vedic-influenced societies — they may have adopted local cultural vocabulary to express their own supreme formless power. Even so, within their own philosophy, Dharmesh has never been a king, but the formless architect of the universe, symbolised by the sun

and by truth.

"Kurukh" and the Ancient Word "Ur"

The intuition that the sound of "Ur" and the ancient migration of "Kurukh" may be connected points in a genuinely sound linguistic direction.

The Dravidian and ancient meaning of "Ur"

- In the Dravidian language family, "Ur" carries a very old and important meaning — "place," "village," "settlement," or "town" (as in many ancient South Indian city names, such as Tirunelveli, Uraiyur).
- In addition, one of the world's earliest cities, in ancient Mesopotamia (Sumerian civilisation), was also named "Ur," carrying the same meaning of settlement or town.

The meaning of "Kurukh"

- The Oraon call themselves "Kurukh." By folk etymology, this is tied to "those who till the soil" or simply "human being."
- Linguists, however, believe "Kurukh" may be formed from "Kuru" (an ancient regional identity) and the suffix "-kh" (which, in north/central Indian dialects, attaches to denote a group or a people).

A Possible Kuru Connection

Historical texts and the Puranas mention the "Kuru" dynasty (of Kurukshetra, in the Mahabharata era). Some historians and anthropologists have debated whether large population groups predating or contemporary with the Aryan arrival in north India held influence over this same region. Whether "Kurukh" descends from any specific king named "Karak" or "Kuru," however, has no solid written historical proof — most linguists connect it instead to an ancient geographic region or language-group, rather than to any one ruler.

> The angle you've reasoned toward — that the sound of "Ur" and the ancient migration of "Kurukh" may be linked — is a strong signal that this community carries very old linguistic and cultural "fossils" folded into its own history.

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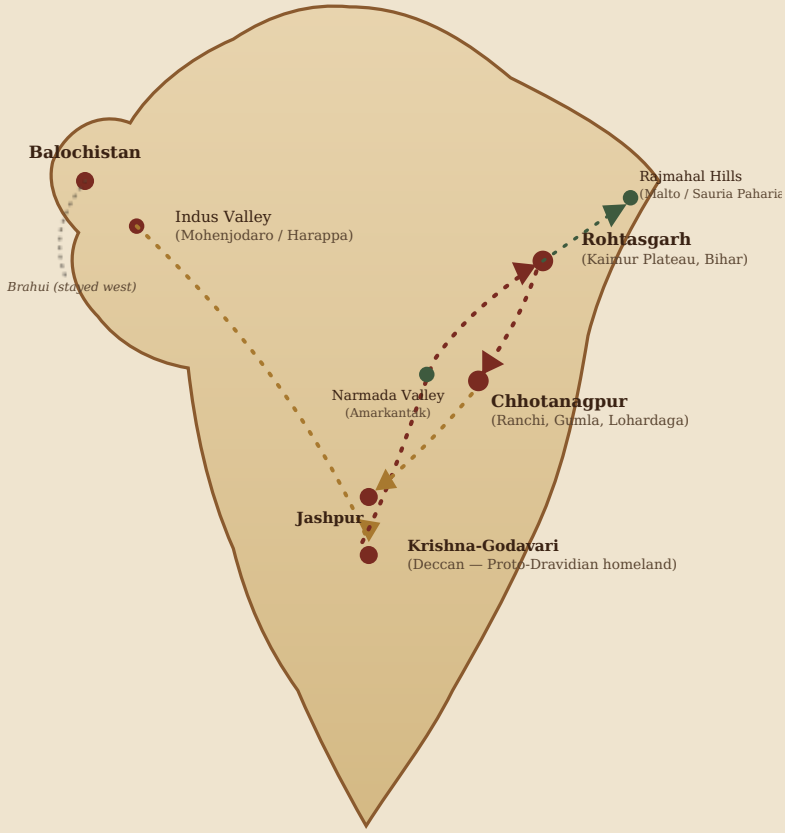
IX. The Migration, Step by Step

The full route, phase by phase, place by place

The migration route of the Oraon (Kurukh) people is one of the most gripping tales of ancient displacement and geographic upheaval on the subcontinent — a journey of thousands of years and thousands of kilometres, reconstructed from folk songs, oral tradition, linguistic evidence, and the scattered forts, place names, and legends left behind at each halting point.

A Map of the Long Road

Before tracing the journey stage by stage, it helps to see it laid out whole. The schematic map below marks the route's principal waypoints as reconstructed from oral tradition and linguistic evidence — from the Indus and Balochistan in the north-west, south to the Deccan, and then the long arc back north-east through the Narmada valley to Rohtasgarh, and finally the spread across Chhotanagpur to Jashpur.



A schematic reconstruction of the Oraon migration route, not a precise cartographic map. Distances and directions are simplified for clarity; the underlying sequence of waypoints follows oral tradition and linguistic reconstruction as discussed throughout this chapter.

Phase 1 — The Deccan and South India (Proto-Dravidian era)

The Oraon ancestors are believed to have originally inhabited South India — particularly the Godavari-Krishna valley and the Konkan/Deccan region — as part of the ancient Proto-Dravidian group, whose reach during the Indus Valley period ran from the north-west to the south. Over time, growing pressure on north India and political-cultural shifts pushed a large portion of this group northward.

One strand of oral tradition adds a specific, named episode to this earliest phase: it recalls a ruler called **Kank Pany**, king of Karkal and Karkai in the Carnatic region of the western coast, remembered as a Kurukh king who built a fortress called **Doshar**. Whatever the precise historical kernel behind this memory, it reflects a persistent community conviction that the Oraon were not wanderers without rulers even in this earliest, southernmost phase of their story, but a people who had already built and lost at least one fortified seat of power before their long walk north ever began.

Phase 2 — Toward Central India, the Narmada-Son Valley

Emerging from South India, these groups pushed north. Historians believe that, moving through the forests of central India, the Vindhya and Satpura ranges, and along the banks of the Narmada-Son valley, they turned toward the plains of north India — settling for centuries at various points along this long journey.

Oral tradition names this leg of the journey in more specific terms: the travellers are said to have reached **Amarkantak**, the sacred source of the Narmada river, and from there a place remembered as the **Kat region**, where they built two more forts — **Anandgarh** and **Pipragarh** — in what is now Madhya Pradesh. Tradition holds that some five hundred years passed before this leg of the journey was complete, after which the travellers reached the banks of the Son river and the Karmanasa, a stretch of country their descendants would come to call, simply, **Kurus Country** — "the country of the Kurus" — the very land on which Rohtasgarh itself would later be built, in the centuries between roughly 900 and 800 BCE, according to the same tradition.

Phase 3 — The Golden Age of Rohtasgarh and Patnagarh (Bihar's Kaimur-Rohtas region)

The most important and best-documented halting point of Oraon history is Rohtasgarh in Bihar and the surrounding Kaimur plateau. Oraon folk songs call it "Ruidas." Here they established a rich and powerful kingdom; under their kings (referred to as Raja Karak or other rulers), agriculture, fortification, and administrative systems developed. Historical conflict: pressure mounted from outside invaders and local dynasties (Cheros-Bhars, and later Sultanate expeditions) in the medieval period. According to a well-known folk tale, a deceptive attack during the Karma or Sarhul festival, and the resistance mounted by heroines (Singi Dai and Kaili Dai), forced them to abandon this fortress. In memory of this event, Oraon society today still observes "Jani Shikar" every twelve years — women hunting in the forest dressed as men, in remembrance of that resistance. The fall of Rohtasgarh is examined in far greater narrative detail, including the specific legend of how the fortress's defenders were finally exposed, in the following chapter.

Phase 4 — The Spread Toward the Chhotanagpur Plateau (present-day main centre)

After leaving Rohtasgarh, the community scattered and split into two main streams: one part moved toward the Rajmahal Hills (Santhal Pargana, Jharkhand), later becoming known as the Malto (Sauria Paharia); the other, larger group moved south-east and settled permanently in the Chhotanagpur plateau (Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardaga in Jharkhand, and the Chhattisgarh-Odisha region).

Oral tradition preserves an unusually specific account of the very moment of arrival and settlement. It names the displaced royal family itself — a king, a queen, and their son, remembered as **Ruidas** — arriving with their remaining soldiers at a village called **Sutiyanba**, near present-day Ranchi, where Munda communities were already established. The head of the soldiers, remembered by name as **Lakhser**, is said to have dismounted from his horse and formally requested shelter from **Manki Madira**, the Munda leader of that place. Manki Madira, the tradition continues, removed his own shield in a gesture of welcome and offered food — including beef and the dishes Kodatoli and Jonkhtoli — to the newly arrived Oraon party, in what oral memory frames as a founding act of hospitality between the two communities. From a marriage between Lakhser's family and the Mundas of Sutiyanba was born a figure remembered as **Budhwa Oroan**, later a Parha leader who governed part of Chhotanagpur and is credited with building a fort called **Navratangarh** at Donysa.

Colonial-era ethnographers offer a complementary, if less personalised, account of this same settlement process. Father Dehon, writing early in the twentieth century, observed that in villages first settled by Oraon families, the population divided into three functional branches — Munda, Pahan, and Mahto — each held to descend from a son of the village's first settler; this is the same Khunt structure discussed in the chapter on gotras and clans. The ethnographer Dalton, meanwhile, records the theory — advanced by several contemporaries, though one he treated with some scepticism given the renowned physical strength of the Munda (locally called the "Larka" or "Fighting" Kols) — that the Munda, being a people averse to living among newcomers, gradually withdrew toward wilder, more remote forest tracts as Oraon numbers grew, in a pattern he compares to the Gonds later yielding ground to Hindu settlers in the Central Provinces. Whether by negotiated welcome, gradual displacement, or some combination of the two across many separate villages, the practical outcome was the same: an Oraon-majority Chhotanagpur, with Munda communities still present throughout, especially in its more remote tracts, and with village headmen among the Oraon still, to this day, traditionally styled "Munda" in acknowledgement of who held the land first.

Phase 5 — Modern-era Migration (Tea Gardens and Other States)

During and after the British period, loss of forest rights, economic hardship, and the search for livelihood carried part of this community to the tea gardens of Assam, West Bengal, the Andaman Islands, and other parts of the country, where they preserve their culture even today. A further wave carried Oraon indentured labourers, during the same colonial period, as far as Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Mauritius — communities descended from these migrants still identify as Kurukh or Oraon in each of those countries today. And the migration has a fifth phase still underway: the movement of Oraon families in the last two or three generations from village to city, into universities, hospitals, and technical professions across India and abroad.

X. Rohtasgarh — The Golden Fortress

Kings, legends, and the archaeology of a living historical layer

On the banks of the Son river, atop the Kaimur plateau, a vast ruin still stands today — a circuit of some 28 miles, 83 gates, and nearly 2,000 steps cut into the hillside to reach it. Oraon folk song remembers it by an older, gentler name: Ruidas. Here once stood an Oraon kingdom; here the warrior-woman Singi Dai raised her sword; and from here, one day, began the community's greatest journey of all — the long displacement that would carry them, at last, to the Chhotanagpur plateau.

Who Were the Oraon Kings of Rohtasgarh?

In Oraon tradition and folk song, Rohtasgarh is called "Ruidas." According to their oral history, this was the seat of Oraon kings and their feudatories. Prominent among the characters of Oraon lore is the heroine **Singi Dai**, who led the Oraon women's army against invaders. Different dynasties and tribal groups (Oraon, Kharwar, Chero-Bhar) held sway over the Kaimur-Rohtas hill region at different times; after the Oraon, Kharwar and Chero rulers rose to prominence here.

The Fall of Ruidas: A Festival, a Betrayal, and a Milkmaid's Secret

Of all the episodes preserved in Oraon oral tradition, none is told with more dramatic specificity than the fall of Rohtasgarh itself. The tradition dates the siege to **1538**, and names the attacker as **Sher Shah Suri**, the Afghan general and future Sultan of Delhi. Sher Shah is said to have deliberately chosen the day of **Sarhul** — the great spring nature-festival — for his assault, for a very particular reason: he knew that on this day, the entire Oraon community would be deep in celebration, and the men in particular thoroughly intoxicated on *hadia*, the traditional rice beer brewed for the festival. A people renowned for their strength and courage, he judged, could only be beaten on the one day of the year they could not stand and fight.

The plan very nearly failed regardless. As Sher Shah's soldiers advanced on the fortress, the Oraon women of Rohtasgarh — finding every one of their men senseless with drink — took up arms themselves. Under the leadership of the princess **Singi Dai**, together with her companions remembered as **Champa** and **Kaili**, the women dressed themselves in men's clothing: they wound turbans (*pheta*) around their heads, wore *dhoti*, trousers, and *langot* in the manner of Oraon men, armed themselves, and marched out to meet the invading army. Three separate times, the chronicle holds, these disguised women drove Sher Shah's soldiers back from the fortress gates.

The fortress fell not to force, in the end, but to a piece of local intelligence. A milkmaid from a neighbouring village, who came daily to Rohtasgarh to sell milk, is remembered as the one who broke the secret. When Sher Shah's demoralised soldiers told her they could not defeat the Oraon, whom they described as impossibly strong and brave, she is said to have laughed at them: "You fools — those are not men you are fighting. They are women. Every Oraon man lies drunk on hadia inside the fort." She then told them how to tell the difference at a distance: an Oraon woman, she explained, washes her face at the river using both hands together, while a man washes his face using only one. The soldiers watched the defenders from a distance as they went down to bathe in the Son river after their third successful defence of the fort — and saw them washing their faces with both hands. Realising the truth, Sher Shah's army returned a fourth time, attacked again, and this time captured the fortress. The Oraon were driven out of Rohtasgarh by force, beginning the displacement that, in time, carried them to the Chhotanagpur plateau.

> Whatever the precise historical kernel beneath this story, its structure repays attention: it is, at once, a proud memory of Oraon strength and resistance (three victories, not a single easy defeat), an honest acknowledgement of a moment of collective vulnerability (a fortress undone by its own festival), and a celebration of female leadership and courage under crisis — themes that reappear, generations later, in the community's continuing observance of Jani Shikar, the once-every-twelve-years hunt in which Oraon women again take up arms and dress as men, in direct, deliberate memory of Singi Dai and her companions.

The dynasty's own line, in this same tradition, is remembered as continuing even in defeat: the displaced royal family — king, queen, and their son **Ruidas**, the very name by which Oraon folk memory still calls the fortress itself — is said to have led the surviving soldiers on the long march that eventually reached Chhotanagpur, an episode picked up again in the previous chapter's account of the settlement at Sutiyanba.

King Harishchandra and the Age of Rohtasgarh — Myth Versus History

- **Mythological reference (Treta Yuga):** mainstream historical and mythological sources hold that Rohtasgarh fort is named for Rohitashva, son of the solar-dynasty king Harishchandra, tying its name back to the Treta Yuga or an ancient era.
- **Historical timeline (medieval period):** though the mythological name may trace to an ancient age, as a strategic fort Rohtasgarh became a major centre of political power during the medieval period (roughly the 6th to 16th centuries). Oraon influence and rule over the region is generally dated from the pre-medieval period through the early Sultanate era (roughly the 12th to 15th centuries). After this, around 1539 CE, Sher Shah Suri took control, and later, under the Mughals, Raja Man Singh made it his provincial capital.

How the two connect: the mythological-era king Rohitashva (son of Harishchandra) and the medieval-era Oraon kings belong to entirely different time periods. It has been common in history for sites founded or discussed in ancient times to be occupied, in later eras, by successive dynasties — local tribal kings, Kharwars, Cheros, and later Afghan-Mughal rulers. For Oraon society, Rohtasgarh ("Ruidas") remains the golden and

struggle-marked centre-point of their history, the place from which, once displaced, they made their way to the Chhotanagpur plateau in Jharkhand.

The Archaeology of the Fort — How Old Is It, Really?

Situated on the Kaimur plateau in Bihar on the banks of the Son river, Rohtasgarh Fort carries an extraordinary, vast, and multi-layered architectural and archaeological history.

Architectural Highlights

- **Scale and security:** built on a vast plateau roughly 1,500 feet above sea level, with a perimeter spanning around 28 miles — among the largest forts in India.
- **Formidable design:** deep moats, dense forest, and natural rock walls surround it. Roughly 2,000 steps were cut into the hillside to reach it (via Medha Ghat and other paths). It has 83 gates in total, including Ghodaghat, Rajghat, Kathautia Ghat, and the main entrance, "Hathiya Pol."

Archaeological Timeline

Mythological / earliest period

Folk tales and Puranas (such as the Harivansha Purana) tie the site to Rohitashva, son of Harishchandra, in the Treta Yuga — though no solid physical/archaeological remains from this earliest mythic period survive today.

7th century — the earliest solid archaeological evidence

A rock-cut inscriptional seal matrix from the (roughly post-Gupta) period, connected to Shashanka, the great feudatory of Bengal, has been found — proving the site was a strategic centre from the early medieval period onward.

12th–13th centuries — local dynastic rule

Inscriptions dated 1169 CE and 1223 CE, found near Phulwari and Lal Darwaza, testify to the rule of local kings (Khairawar/Kharwar dynasty) such as Pratapdhwaj. Around and after this period, tribal societies (Oraon, Kharwar, Chero) held sway here.

16th century — medieval reinforcement (Sher Shah Suri and Raja Man Singh)

Much of what survives today as ruins belongs to this Sultanate/Mughal-era architecture. In 1539 Sher Shah Suri took the fort and strengthened its military defences; the Jama Masjid here dates to 1543 CE. Later, Mughal emperor Akbar's general Raja Man Singh (after 1558) made it his capital/headquarters, blending Rajput and Persian styles to build the Aina Mahal, Rangmahal, Sheesh Mahal, and a temple of Lord Ganesha.

Archaeological verdict: Rohtasgarh is not a monument of one single era. It is a "living historical layer" — beneath, the cultural remains of ancient tribal and local kings lie buried; above, the magnificent ruins of medieval Afghan (Sher Shah) and Mughal-Rajput architecture (Man Singh's palaces, gates, and temple) still stand.

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XI. Life Inside the Golden Age

Society, roles, attitude — and an echo of the Indus Valley

During the Rohtasgarh period and the era around it, the lifestyle, outlook, and social structure of the Oraon (Kurukh) community were, at their core, egalitarian and nature-centred. Unlike Vedic or classical Hindu society, they never followed a Brahmin–Kshatriya–Vaishya–Shudra style caste hierarchy. Their society was free of birth-based high-low or caste-based discrimination.

Social Structure and Division of Roles

- **Clan-based system ("khilli"):** Oraon society was divided not into varnas but into clans (Toppo, Lakra, Minz, Kispotta, and others), each named for a tree, plant, or animal, or a natural object. Crucially, all clans held equal social standing — no clan was considered higher or lower than another.
- **Functional roles** — responsibilities were distributed for smooth community function, but based on merit or selection, never on heredity:
  - **Pahan** — the village's religious head or priest, who conducts worship and rituals.
  - **Mahto** — the village's administrative or secular head, who made social and administrative decisions.
  - **Kotwar** — the person responsible for messages and security.

Lifestyle

- **An agriculture- and forest-centred life:** even in that era, livelihood centred on farming (especially paddy) and a life closely woven with the forest, keeping them in close step with nature.
- **Collectivism:** Oraon culture placed community welfare above individual interest. Decisions were never made by a single king or chief, but by the full village assembly, or the "Padha Panchayat," together.
- **The youth house ("Dhumkuria"):** a uniquely ancient Oraon social institution — a kind of youth training centre where village boys and girls were taught discipline, cultural history, dance and music, and the ways of community defence.

Attitude and Temperament

- **Warrior spirit and love of freedom:** across the Rohtasgarh era and before, the community's attitude was thoroughly freedom-loving and combative. Rather than accept subjugation, they preferred to struggle in forests, mountains, and difficult terrain.
- **Devotion to nature and justice:** their entire outlook rested on the belief that man is not the owner of nature but part of it. Unwavering faith in Dharmesh (the supreme power) and in nature was the backbone of their discipline.
- **Collectivity and festivity:** however great the crisis or displacement, music, dance (Jhumar), and festivals (Sarhul, Karma) never diminished. In times of crisis, the whole community stood united like a rock.

> In short, even in the Rohtasgarh era, this was not a people living in palatial luxury like kings and emperors — they were an organised, self-respecting, labouring warrior tribe, living under their democratic Padha Panchayat system.

Parallel with the Indus Valley Civilisation

The likeness between Oraon life and the Indus Valley Civilisation shows itself in several striking ways:

1. Administrative and political parallel: decentralised democracy

Archaeological evidence (large bathing tanks, granaries, and the absence of any grand palace or king's ruins) leads historians to believe the Indus civilisation was not a monarchy but a commercial, egalitarian system built on collective management. In precisely the same way, the Oraon Padha Panchayat runs not on a king's command but on collective consensus and the decisions of elders — with power resting not in one person's hands but distributed across the whole community.

2. Urban planning and collectivism

The Indus civilisation was known for its planned settlements and welfare-oriented structures. Oraon society, too, values collective cooperation over private property. The Dhumkuria youth house likely mirrors the role once played by community buildings or training centres in Indus-era social life.

3. Nature and water management

Indus seals show clear evidence of nature-worship — Pashupatinath (the lord of nature and animals), the pipal tree, and the Mother Goddess. Dharmesh, nature, the sun (Biri), water, and forest sit at the very centre of Oraon philosophy — a worldview that matches the essential spirit of Indus culture entirely.

When Indus cities fell into ruin or came under pressure from the north-west, their people spread toward South and Central India. Their language (North Dravidian), their way of life, and their egalitarian administrative structure gradually settled into the forests and plateaus. Seen this way, Oraon society is not merely a tribal community — it is a living archive of Indus-era, ancient Proto-Dravidian culture, one that has stayed connected to its original roots even through the buffeting of time.

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XII. From the Mother's House to the Father's Line

The long transition from matrilineal to patrilineal society

The shift in Oraon society from a matriarchal/matrilineal to a patriarchal/patrilineal system was never a single sudden event — it was a long historical and social transition, tied chiefly to changes in livelihood and to regional migration.

From Nomadism and Hunting Toward Settled Agriculture

In ancient societies built primarily on hunting and forest produce, women's role in feeding and sustaining the community was immense. In such early societies, kinship and lineage identity, tied more securely and clearly to the mother, formed the basis of matriarchy in many ancient tribal societies. When the Oraon ancestors abandoned hunting and adopted settled agriculture, land became the chief form of property, and the nature of labour changed. The heavy physical work of tilling land and clearing forest gradually concentrated social control in men's hands, and inheritance rules turned patrilineal to carry land from one generation to the next.

Migration and Contact With Other Cultures (Acculturation)

As they moved from South India through central India and Rohtasgarh toward the Chhotanagpur plateau, contact grew with other local societies and, gradually, with the agriculture-centred systems of north-central India. Over this long journey and the process of settling communities, for the sake of security and administrative convenience, the patrilineal lineage system was fully adopted. Today Oraon society is clearly patriarchal, with lineage, clan ("khilli"), and property inheritance passing from father to son.

What Survives of the Mother's Honour

Even though the society is now administratively and socially fully patriarchal, glimpses of its ancient

egalitarian roots remain visible today in its customs — remnants of matriarchal or feminine honour:

- **Jani Shikar:** once every twelve years, in this festival, women dress in men's clothing and go hunting in the forest with traditional weapons — recalling the historical moment when, in the crisis at Rohtasgarh, women (such as Singi Dai) took command.
- **Family and social decision-making:** compared to other, more orthodox mainstream societies, Oraon women enjoy considerably more freedom and respect in social life, dance and music, agricultural work, and household decisions.

Thus, as their society shifted from nomadism to a settled agrarian community and strengthened its political system, they moved fully, step by step, from a matriarchal or tribal-egalitarian structure toward an organised patriarchal system.

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XIII. Kings, Revolts, and the Road to Jharkhand

From Durjan Sai's captivity to the birth of a state

The story of the Oraon in Chhotanagpur does not end with the founding of new villages around Ranchi. Over the four centuries that followed their settlement, the plateau saw the rise and fall of regional kings, a string of nineteenth-century rebellions against colonial land policy, an internal battle with their Munda neighbours still commemorated at an annual fair, and finally a decades-long political movement — led disproportionately, and somewhat ironically, by Christian Oraon leaders — that culminated in the creation of the state of Jharkhand itself in the year 2000.

Durjan Sai and the Diamond in the Jail Cell (1616)

In 1616, a descendant of the Nag dynasty named **Durjan Sai** became king of Chhotanagpur and made Ramgarh his capital. This was the era of the Mughal emperor Jahangir in Delhi, who demanded tribute from the Oraon and Munda populations under Durjan Sai's rule. When the king proved unable to meet this tax demand, Jahangir's governor, Ebrahim Khan, marched on Ramgarh. Durjan Sai was captured and imprisoned in the fort of Gwalior, where he spent twelve years. According to regional tradition, it was there, in captivity, that he discovered and developed a particular skill: recognising and grading diamonds. This talent eventually won him release and a return to Ramgarh — though, tradition adds, at the cost of much of his own cultural distance from his origins, as prolonged exposure to the Mughal court is said to have drawn him toward the wider Indo-Aryan courtly culture of the day.

Jagarnath and the Tax Crisis of 1831

Two centuries later, in 1831, **Jagarnath** became king of Chhotanagpur just as the British colonial administration was tightening its grip on land revenue across the region. Unable to meet the escalating tax demands now being placed on Chhotanagpur, Jagarnath found his authority undermined from both directions — squeezed by the colonial administration above him and by a restless, overtaxed peasantry below him. The result, within a year, was open war.

The Kol Insurrection and Ganga Narayan's Revolt (1832)

In 1832, fighting broke out across the plateau between British forces and the Adivasi population, in what colonial records call the **Kol Insurrection**. A great many Adivasis died in the fighting. The same year saw a parallel uprising, the **Ganga Narayan Revolt**, adding to a widening pattern of nineteenth-century tribal resistance across the Chhotanagpur region — a pattern that would recur, in various forms, for the rest of the century, and that includes the far better documented Birsa Munda movement of the 1890s among the neighbouring Munda community.

The Sardar War and the Battle of Murma (1895)

In 1895, a movement known as the **Sardar War** broke out, directed against both colonial authority and, in places, against Sikh migrant settlement in the region; a great many people were killed in the fighting that followed. That same broad period also saw a sharper, more local conflict — a war fought between the Kurukh (Oraon) and the neighbouring Munda at a place called **Murma**, near Mandar. The Munda side was defeated. In memory of that victory, Oraon communities have, ever since, gathered every year at Murma for a large mela, or fair — originally the site of traditional Mela and Jatra dances, though in more recent decades the gathering has grown into something closer to a large seasonal market, its original ritual character increasingly overlaid by commerce.

> The Murma mela is a useful reminder that Chhotanagpur's Adivasi communities, while sharing a broad regional identity and often described together as a single "tribal" bloc, have their own distinct histories of both alliance and conflict with one another — Oraon and Munda relations across the centuries have run the full range from the negotiated coexistence described in earlier chapters to open warfare such as this.

1908: A Law That Let Land Be Saved

In 1908, the colonial government passed the land tenancy act that later chapters of this account discuss in more detail — the **Chotanagpur Tenancy Act**. For the first time, Oraon and other Adivasi cultivators had a formal legal mechanism to contest the loss of their land to outside landlords and moneylenders, a turning

point that would shape the community's relationship to both the colonial state and, later, to the Christian missions that had helped campaign for exactly this kind of protection.

Missionaries, Education, and an Unexpected Political Class

The arrival of Christian missionaries in Chhotanagpur, beginning in 1845, brought consequences well beyond religious conversion. The colonial administration, seeking an educated class capable of staffing its own local bureaucracy, made deliberate use of mission schools to create precisely such a class — a cohort of tribal people educated along a Western pattern, for the first time creating meaningful social stratification within an otherwise largely classless tribal society. Numerous associations grew out of this newly educated, largely Christian tribal elite: a Christian association founded by Lutheran graduates in 1898; a Christian Students' Organisation in 1912; the Chhotanagpur Charitable Association, also in 1912; the **Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj** in 1915, led by Joel Lakra; and the Catholic Sabha in 1935, organised through the efforts of the Catholic politician Ignes Beck.

These separate associations gradually merged into the **Chotanagpur Adivasi Mahasabha** in 1938, the organisation that first articulated a political movement for tribal self-governance and, eventually, a separate tribal-majority state. That movement crystallised in 1949 into the **Jharkhand Party**, which by 1952 had become the largest opposition bloc in the Bihar state assembly. Its most prominent leaders — Jaipal Singh, Theodor Surin, Ignace Beck, Paul Dayal, Julius Tigga, Bonifas Lakra, Samuel Purti, N. E. Horo, and Jastin Richard — worked in close alliance with one notable non-Christian counterpart, **Bandiram Oraon**. It is a detail worth pausing on: in a movement fundamentally about tribal identity and tribal land rights, nearly every senior leader belonged to the Christian minority within that identity, working shoulder to shoulder with their Sarna counterparts toward a shared political goal that transcended the religious line dividing them.

From Party Politics to Statehood

The Jharkhand Party's momentum carried it to further success in 1957, though the broader movement went through decades of fragmentation and reinvention afterward — a merger with the Congress party in 1963 that brought Jaipal Singh himself into a ministerial post, the rise of Shibu Soren's Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in the Santhal Pargana region through the 1970s, and the more confrontational student-led agitation of the All Jharkhand Students Union through the 1980s, which eventually produced a Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council in 1995. The demand for a distinct tribal-majority state that these organisations, across their many transformations, had first raised in 1955 was finally granted forty-five years later: **Jharkhand became India's twenty-eighth state in November 2000**, carved from the southern districts of Bihar, alongside the near-simultaneous creation of Chhattisgarh from Madhya Pradesh — the very two states in which most Oraon families live today.

A dedicated academic infrastructure for the Kurukh language itself emerged during this same period of political awakening: in 1981, Ranchi University opened a Tribal and Regional Language department offering

postgraduate study in five tribal languages of the region, Kurukh among them — training a new generation of scholars and writers, and producing poetry, song, and prose in a language that, a century earlier, had existed almost entirely outside any classroom.

> Seen end to end, this two-century arc — from Durjan Sai's captivity, through the tax revolts of the 1830s, the internal Oraon-Munda conflict at Murma, the missionary-educated political class of the early twentieth century, and finally to statehood in 2000 — traces a community that never simply endured history, but actively, repeatedly organised to shape it: contesting land seizure through the courts, contesting colonial taxation through open revolt, and finally contesting its own political marginalisation through party politics sustained across three generations.

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PART FOUR · NEW GODS, NEW KINGS

XIV. The Slow Hinduisation

When did it begin, and how did it unfold?

There is no single fixed day or year marking the start of Oraon Hinduisation (Sanskritisation) — it has been a very long, gradual, and multi-dimensional historical process, the result of centuries-old cultural interaction alongside modern political and social movements.

1. Early, Informal Contact and Regional Integration (Medieval Period to the 19th Century)

As the Oraon and other tribal communities emerged from the forests and plateaus into contact with Hindu-ruled plains, centuries of ideological and religious exchange began. At the local level, through fairs, markets, and agricultural festivals, tribals gradually began weaving the stories and symbols of several Hindu deities (such as Durga, Kali, Mahadev/Shiva, or Hanuman) into their folk culture. Initially this was very limited and localised, alongside their original Sarna (nature worship), where they began also honouring nearby deities.

2. The Entry of Ideological and Social Organisations (Early 20th Century – Post-1950)

After independence, and particularly from the 1950s and 60s, this took on an organised character. When national-level ideological organisations (such as the Sangh Parivar-linked "Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram," founded

in 1952, in Jashpur itself) expanded their reach into tribal regions under the guise of education, health, and service work, they intensified efforts to bring tribals closer to mainstream Hindu society. During this period, tribals were told and taught that their nature worship (Dharti Aaba, Sarna Mata, and others) was, in fact, an ancient form of Sanatan Dharma and Hindu tradition itself (as, for instance, worshipping nature as a form of Shakti or Shiva).

3. A Period of Social and Political Polarisation (Post-1980s)

After the 1980s, when a large ideological struggle began against the influence of Christian missionaries and religious conversion, the campaign to link Sarna and Sanatan (Hindu) traditions intensified further. During this period, tribal community participation in fairs, religious events, and festivals such as Ram Navami and other Hindu observances was actively encouraged on a large scale.

When Did Worship of Hindu Deities by Sarna Followers Begin?

There is likewise no single fixed year or date marking when Sarna Oraon (or other tribal communities) began worshipping Hindu deities. This was not a sudden decision, but a centuries-old, slow process of cultural assimilation and Sanskritisation.

Centuries of Informal Mixing (Medieval and Princely Era)

As Oraon and other tribal communities emerged from forests and plateaus into contact with the plains — under Hindu kings, landlords, and farmers — ideological and religious exchange began between the two cultures. At the local level, during fairs, markets, and agricultural festivals, tribals gradually began weaving several Hindu deities and symbols into their folk culture. Initially this was very limited and confined to the local level, where alongside their own "Sarna" (nature worship) they began to also revere nearby deities.

The Entry of Ideological and Social Organisations (Early 20th Century — post-1950)

A systematic, organised shift began after independence, particularly from the 1950s and 60s onward. When national-level ideological organisations (such as the Sangh Parivar-linked "Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram," established in 1952 in Jashpur itself) expanded their presence into tribal areas under the cover of education, health, and service work, they intensified efforts to bring tribals closer to mainstream Hindu society. During this period, tribals were told that their nature worship was, in truth, an ancient form of Sanatan Dharma and Hindu tradition.

The Period of Social and Political Polarisation (Post-1980s)

After the 1980s, when a large-scale ideological struggle emerged against the influence of Christian missionaries

and religious conversion, the campaign to fuse Sarna and Sanatan (Hindu) traditions further intensified. During this period tribal participation in fairs, religious gatherings, and Hindu festivals such as Ram Navami was actively encouraged on a large scale.

The Present Situation: Two Opposing Streams

Today, Oraon society appears clearly divided on this question:

1. **The traditional/Sarna activist stream:** holds firmly that the Oraon and other tribals were never Hindu, and are not now. They have their own independent "Sarna Dharma" practice, and view the worship of Hindu deities as an assimilation (mixing) into their original tribal culture. This group is today, nationwide, demanding legal recognition through a distinct "Sarna Code," so that their identity can be recognised as separate from Hinduism or any other religion.
2. **The syncretist / Hindutva-aligned stream:** holds that tribal culture and Sanatan Hinduism spring from the very same root, and therefore worship Hindu deities alongside their traditional practices.

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PART FOUR · NEW GODS, NEW KINGS

XV. The Cross Arrives in the Hills

Christian missionaries in the Chhotanagpur region

Among the tribal communities of the Jharkhand and Chhotanagpur region (especially the Oraon and Munda), the influence of Christian missionaries began to be felt from the mid-nineteenth century onward.

The Beginning of Arrival (1845 — the Gossner Mission)

The formal start of missionary history in Jharkhand dates to 2 November 1845, when a group of four pastors from Germany (Bavaria) reached Ranchi under the leadership of Reverend John Sebastian Gossner's mission (G.E.L. — Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Mission). In the early days, these missionaries faced considerable local resistance. As their contact grew with the Oraon and other tribal groups of the region — the most exploited, poorest, and forced-labour-burdened — they began establishing a foothold through education, medicine, and social assistance.

Rapid Expansion and the Arrival of the Catholic Mission (1860s–1890s)

From the 1850s onward, the Oraon community's leaning toward Christianity grew rapidly. The chief reason was economic exploitation of the tribals by landlords, moneylenders, and the British Raj, along with the illegal seizure of their land. Missionaries helped secure legal and social protection, which drew large numbers into converting. In 1869, under the leadership of Father Constant Lievens, the influence of the Roman Catholic mission expanded rapidly across the region, particularly reaching deep into Oraon-populated areas, where the Catholic church's presence spread on a very large scale.

Impact on Society

- **Education and modernisation:** missionaries established modern education, schools, and hospitals in the region, developing literacy and administrative understanding among the Oraon. Missionaries and priests (such as Father Hoffmann) also played a large role in the drafting of the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA, 1908), which helped protect tribal land.
- **Cultural and social division:** the other side of this influence was that cultural and ideological distances grew between traditionally nature-worshipping (Sarna) Oraon and Christian Oraon. While one side gained modern rights and education, the community's older homogeneity and traditional beliefs began to shift.

Where First, and In What Order? The Regional Spread of Conversion

Phase 1 — Ranchi and its immediate surroundings (from 1845, Protestant/Lutheran mission)
In November 1845, four pastors of the German Gossner Evangelical Lutheran (G.E.L.) mission (Reverend Ish Schatz, Friedrich Batsch, and others) reached Ranchi. The early years (roughly 1845–1850) were spent purely on learning the language and offering medicine and education. The first conversion came in June 1850, when four Oraon youths near Ranchi converted, after considerable struggle. By the 1857 uprising, a few hundred people had joined the Protestant/Lutheran church, mainly concentrated around Ranchi.

Phase 2 — Southern Ranchi and the Khunti region (from 1868, Anglican/Church of England)
Due to internal disputes within the Lutheran church and administrative conflict, and with the support of British Commissioner Dalton, a large part of the congregation moved under the Anglican Church (Church of England/British Mission). Alongside this, British missionary influence spread rapidly across the rural belt south of Ranchi.

Phase 3 — Torpa, Gumla, Lohardaga, and the far southern plateau (from 1885, the "miracle" of the Catholic mission)
In 1885, Father Constant Lievens — a Belgian Jesuit priest known as the "Apostle of Chotanagpur" — made Torpa (60 km south of Ranchi) his centre. At that time landlords and moneylenders were seizing tribal land and forcing bonded, unpaid labour (begar) upon them. Father Lievens studied customary tribal law and fought cases on behalf of tribals in colonial courts, winning back seized land. Drawn by this

model of legal and social justice, thousands of Oraon and Munda people flocked to the Catholic church in large numbers — an event history remembers as the "Miracle of Chotanagpur."

Phase 4 — Western and remote areas, Barway, Biru, and Gangpur (from the 1890s)
After Father Lievens, other Jesuit priests (such as Father Cordier and Father Hoffmann) carried the campaign further, reaching remote and heavily forested regions west of the Ranchi plateau, including the western plateau belt of Barway and princely states bordering Chhattisgarh-Odisha, such as Gangpur and Udaipur — regions with dense Oraon population, where landlord exploitation once again drove large-scale adoption of Catholic Christianity.

Chronological Summary

1. **1845 (Ranchi):** arrival of the German Lutheran mission (slow start; first Oraon conversions in 1850).
2. **1868 (Southern rural Ranchi):** expansion of the Anglican (British) mission.
3. **1885 (Torpa and surrounding region):** Father Constant Lievens begins the Catholic mission and, through a land-liberation movement, drives large-scale conversion.
4. **1890s onward (Gumla, Lohardaga, Barway, and the western plateau):** the full expansion of the missionary network into remote Oraon-dominant villages and princely states.

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XVI. Jashpur — A Kingdom of Thorns

The next great chapter after Rohtasgarh and Chhotanagpur

Jashpur district in Chhattisgarh, bordering Jharkhand, sits at the very centre of Oraon history, migration, religious conversion, and modern political-cultural change.

Geography and History (The Next Stop of Migration)

From the Chhotanagpur plateau, a very large section of the Oraon community moved further south-west, into what today spreads across the Jashpur, Surguja, and Raigarh districts of Chhattisgarh. Jashpur's terrain — dense forests, hills, and plateaus — offered the Oraon the most suitable environment to preserve their agriculture-centred, nature-focused way of life. Historically the region fell under a scattering of small princely states, under the influence of local kings and landlords.

The Christian Missionary Entry and Jashpur's Great Transformation

- **Catholic mission's main centre:** as in Chhotanagpur, by the late 19th century (1890s) and into the early 20th century, missionary influence spread through Ranchi and Gumla all the way to Jashpur princely state.
- **Liberation from exploitation and religious conversion:** the tribals of Jashpur, too, were crushed under economic exploitation, forced labour, and heavy taxation by local kings, tax-farmers, and moneylenders. When priests and missionaries spread a network of education, medicine, and legal aid (protecting land rights) here, a large-scale process of Oraon conversion to Christianity began.
- Jashpur has today become a Chhattisgarh district with a considerable Christian tribal population (particularly Oraon), and this demographic shift is clearly reflected in the district's demography.

Sarna Versus Christian — Cultural and Ideological Polarisation

For some decades now, Jashpur has also been a major centre of conflict over tribal cultural identity. On one side stand Oraon who preserve their original "Sarna Dharma" (nature worship and traditional tribal culture); on the other, Oraon families who have adopted Christianity. This ideological and religious divide has, from time to time, generated debate and friction around cultural identity, politics, and conversion in Jashpur's social fabric — making it a politically sensitive and much-discussed region.

> In short, Jashpur is the chapter of Oraon history where geographic migration, the sting of medieval princely-state rule, the heavy social-religious change brought by missionary influence, and the politics of modern identity all converge and collide most deeply.

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XVII. The Weight of the Crown

Dom kings, the rise of the Chauhans, and the burden they placed on the people

Under every throne, somewhere, the ash of an old rebellion lies buried. Jashpur's was no exception — born from the fall of a tyrant king, watered by the resolve of a wandering prince, and then, across generations, laying its own burden of forced labour and heavy revenue on the very people who had first raised it to power. This is the story of the Jashpur throne, where every hand that wore the crown rested, in the end, on the sweat of some tribal family below it.

The Dom Dynasty (mid-18th century)

Before the Chauhan dynasty's arrival, a large part of Jashpur's "Khudia" region was ruled by the **Dom dynasty**. Its most prominent and final ruler was **Raja Raibhan**. Their rule centred mainly around the "Khudia" area. According to local folklore, in the early period they were local administrators, but over time their rule became considerably harsh and oppressive, leaving ordinary subjects and local tribes exhausted and deeply discontented.

Religion and caste of the Dom rulers: the Dom dynasty and its ruling line followed Sanatan Hinduism, with references to worship of local deities, havan-kunds, and traditional rituals in the customs tied to their rule — a tradition remembered similarly to the well-known Dom Raja lineage of Kashi (Varanasi). They are remembered in local and historical memory as a "Dom" or "Dom Raja" dynasty; as one of the regional ruling clans of that era, later historical upheaval and political defeat folded them, over time, into different strands of the social hierarchy. Even today, several cultural traditions of the region (such as the traditional drums played during Dussehra/Vijayadashami) preserve a special role and memory tied to the descendants of this dynasty.

The Founding of the Chauhan Dynasty

The founding of the Chauhan line in Jashpur carries a well-known and colourful historical tale.

- **Original homeland (migration from Rajputana):** the Jashpur royal family's lineage traces itself back to Bagra/Bagharwada state in old Rajputana (present-day Rajasthan). Their ancestors had earlier arrived at Sonpur state, on the Madhya Pradesh-Odisha border.
- **The story of Sujan Rai:** it is said that Sujan Rai, elder son of the Suryavanshi (solar-dynasty) king of Sonpur, once went hunting in the deep forest. During this time his father, the king, passed away. Per royal tradition the throne could not sit empty, so his younger brother was crowned. When Sujan Rai returned from the hunt and learned what had happened, he refused to take the throne, and, like an ascetic, set off into the forests.
- **The fall of the Dom king and the founding of a new state:** wandering onward, Sujan Rai reached the "Khudia" area of Jashpur. There he found the people on the verge of rebellion, exhausted by the tyranny of Dom king Raibhan. The dissatisfied populace and tribal people urged Sujan Rai to lead them. Sujan Rai led the popular uprising, and in a decisive battle, defeated and killed Dom king Raibhan. Following this, in the mid-18th century, Sujan Rai laid the foundation of the **Chauhan Rajput dynasty** in Jashpur, establishing "Jashpur State" as a new independent kingdom.

The Onward Journey of the State (British and Maratha Era)

After the dynasty's founding, the Maratha (Bhosale dynasty of Nagpur) influence over the region grew, and Jashpur's kings had to pay annual tribute (such as 21 buffaloes or a fixed revenue) to them. After 1818, the

region came under British political control and was placed under Surguja State and later the Chhotanagpur Commissionership's administrative purview. The dynasty's final ruler, **Raja Vijay Bhushan Singh Deo**, merged the state into the Union of India in 1948.

Full Chronology of the Chauhan Kings

Ruler	Period / Note
Raja Sujan Rai (founder)	Mid-18th century — defeated Dom king Raibhan and founded the dynasty
(Several intervening generations)	Local tribal and Maratha/Bhosale oversight in the early period
Raja Ram Singh	1826–1845 CE
Raja Pratap Narayan Singh Deo Bahadur	1845–1900 CE — British influence and missionary activity accelerated during his reign
Raja Bishan Pratap Singh Deo	1900–1924 CE
Raja Deo Saran Singh Deo	1924–1926 CE
Raja Vijay Bhushan Singh Deo	1931–1948 CE — final ruler; oversaw the merger with India

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The Ruling Family's Attitude and Behaviour Toward the Tribals

From beginning to end, the attitude of the Jashpur royal family and its feudal apparatus toward the tribals rested chiefly on a ruler-subject relationship, class superiority, and revenue extraction.

(a) The Early and Medieval Period — Feudal Control and Exploitation

- **Revenue collection and forced labour (begar):** early Chauhan kings and the jagirdars/estate-holders serving beneath them treated tribals purely as "producers" of their land and as taxpayers. The king was held to hold supreme right over forest, land, and farming.
- **Begar (unpaid forced labour):** free, forced labour was extracted from tribal farmers for building palaces, roads, and hunting expeditions. Resistance was met with harsh punishment under feudal justice.
- **Social distance:** the Rajput rulers considered themselves of high lineage, while placing the original tribal (Oraon, Korwa, and others) societies considerably lower in the social order — a deep cultural separation between the two.

(b) The Later Period — Tension After the Arrival of the British Raj and Missionaries

- **Rising discontent:** by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the tax burden grew heavier and moneylenders and royal agents began seizing tribal land, tribal anger at the rulers boiled over.
- **Missionaries and the struggle for justice:** when tribal farmers began turning to the church and to priests to protect their land, the royal court saw this as a direct challenge to its authority. Rulers in the early period tried to pressure and restrain Oraon converts to Christianity, but British-era laws (such as the later CNT/SPT Acts protective measures) increasingly limited their high-handedness.

(c) The Final Rulers and the Post-Independence Period

In the final decades of their rule (particularly up to Raja Vijay Bhushan Singh Deo's time), the royal family too began to sense the shifting political winds. When the state merged into the Union of India in 1948, royal political power formally ended — but the family's social influence and prestige in the region persisted for a long time afterward.

> In sum, the history of Jashpur's kings is a testament to how a monarchy, to sustain its own comfort and please British authority, kept the Oraon and other tribal communities — who for centuries had lived free among the forests — bound in the shackles of forced labour, taxation, and feudal servitude. This is precisely why, when the country gained independence, the people here welcomed the end of monarchy and the arrival of democratic governance with open hearts.

Detailed Accounts of Oppression, Ruler by Ruler

1. The Dom Dynasty and Its Oppression (mid-18th century)

Before the arrival of the Chauhan dynasty, the "Khudia" region was under Dom rule, a period of intense mental and physical torment for tribals and common people. According to folklore and oral history, caste discrimination and untouchability ran high; even other neighbouring kings or upper-caste individuals faced heavy restrictions passing through Dom territory. King Raibhan's (the final Dom ruler) reign turned dictatorial and oppressive — heavy taxes were forcibly extracted from farmers and Oraon/Kharwar tribal groups. The people were so exhausted that they invited Sujan Rai (a Rajput prince) to lead the revolt against the Dom king, culminating in a bloody confrontation and the end of Dom rule.

2. The Chauhan Dynasty's Rulers and Their Oppressive Attitude Toward Tribals

When Sujan Rai founded the Chauhan dynasty, the early support was strong — but as generations passed, this

kingship, too, turned into a harsh feudal system of exploitation.

- **Raja Ranjit Singh and Raja Ram Singh Deo (early 19th century):** when tribals and local chiefs (such as Lal Sangram Singh) in the Surguja region rebelled against British rule, Jashpur's rulers sided with the British to protect their own power — capturing and handing over rebellious tribals and freedom-loving members of their own territory to the British, sowing fear and resentment among the local population.
- **Raja Pratap Narayan Singh Deo (1850–1900) — the darkest period of exploitation:** this was the period of the most severe economic and social exploitation of tribals in Jashpur. The king, his jagirdars, and "ilaqedars" (petty feudal lords) treated tribal farmers virtually as slaves. Begar (forced labour without wages) was extracted for palace construction, roads, and royal hunting expeditions; a farmer unable to leave field work for this duty could be whipped or have his land confiscated. Whether the harvest was good or the year brought drought, the king's agents (contractors and administrators) demanded their revenue regardless. Moneylenders, under royal protection, lent tribals money at extortionate interest, and when it could not be repaid, seized their fertile land.
- **Raja Bishen Pratap Singh Deo and Deo Saran Singh Deo (early 20th century):** because Jashpur state was large, it was divided into five major zamindaris (estates); these zamindars committed boundless atrocities against tribals in the king's name. Grain, livestock, and taxes were forcibly extracted from women and ordinary tribals; resistance meant entire villages could be socially boycotted or driven into the forest. When tribals sought refuge with the church and priests (as in Father Lievens' time) against this unbearable oppression, and tried legally to protect their land, the royal court and these feudal lords adopted new tactics — filing false cases against and persecuting the newly Christian tribals.

> **Conclusion:** the history of Jashpur's rulers stands witness to how a monarchy, to sustain its own luxury and please the British administration, bound the Oraon and other tribal communities — who for centuries had lived free amid nature — in the chains of forced labour, taxation, and feudal servitude.

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XVIII. Sarna and Cross — One Root, Two Branches

The political fault line, the deeper continuity beneath it, and what still binds the two together

This book closes, fittingly, where so many Oraon family trees themselves now branch — at the question of Sarna and Cross. Behind the distance and division between Christian Oraon and Sarna Oraon communities lies a very real and deep role played by politics, ideological agendas, and power-equations, examined honestly in the pages ahead. But it closes, too, on something more important than the fault line itself: the wide, largely unbroken ground of shared clan, shared language, shared festival, and shared family that both sides of that line still stand on together, whether or not either side always says so aloud.

Ideological and Political Polarisation

Across the Jashpur and wider Chhattisgarh-Jharkhand belt, the royal family and right-wing organisations (RSS, and groups like the Janjati Suraksha Manch) have consistently kept the issue of religious conversion at the centre of their politics. "Delisting" (the demand to remove tribals who have converted to Christianity from ST reservation and lists) and campaigns like "Ghar Wapsi" are, at their core, political and ideological strategies aimed at polarising tribal society along cultural lines. This ideological division has a direct bearing on elections: in tribal-dominated regions like Surguja and Jashpur, when the community splits between Sarna (supporters of the original culture) and Christian camps, political parties craft strategies to capitalise on the split. One school of analysts views this as a calculated political manoeuvre to secure power and consolidate vote banks.

On the other side, Christian Oraon organisations (such as the Christian Adivasi Mahasabha) and Sarna committees hold that tribals are, at root, tied to their own culture, forest-land identity, and "nature-worshipping" belief. Their view is that artificial walls are being widened between them for political gain, in order to fracture their unity. It would be entirely fair to say that while the beginning of this division may have been religious and cultural change, keeping it alive, fanning it, and building an entire political ground around it today owes a very great deal to various political parties and ideologies, on more than one side of the divide.

What the Politics Obscures

And yet, set against the loud, election-season rhetoric of division, the quieter, everyday evidence tells a more complicated and, in many ways, more hopeful story.

One Gotra System, Regardless of Church or Sarna Sthal

Every table in this book's chapter on clans and totems applies exactly as fully to a devout Christian Oraon family as to a Sarna one. A Kerketta who attends Sunday Mass still, in most families, will not kill a sparrow; a Minj who has been baptised still does not eat the Minj fish; the rule against marrying within one's own gotra binds both communities with equal force, because it was never a religious rule to begin with — it is older than either Sarna reform or Christian mission, and neither has displaced it. When a Sarna Toppo family and a Christian Kispotta family arrange a marriage between their children, as happens constantly across Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh today, they are not crossing a religious boundary so much as confirming a tribal one that both households still honour identically.

One Language, Sung and Prayed In Both

Kurukh itself does not divide by religion. Christian liturgy in many Oraon parishes is conducted, at least in part, in Kurukh; Sarna prayer and folk song are conducted in Kurukh; the Tolong Siki script, developed by Narayan Oraon and promoted by the Kurukh Literary Society since 2006, belongs to Sarna and Christian Oraon writers alike, with no sectarian claim on it from either side. A hymn translated into Kurukh and a Sarhul folk song in Kurukh draw on the very same grammar, the very same inclusive-and-exclusive "we," discussed in this book's chapter on language — a "we" that, linguistically at least, still includes both congregations without distinction.

Shared Festivals, Still Widely Kept

Sarhul and Karma, the two great festivals described in this book's opening chapter, are not observed only by Sarna households. Across large parts of rural Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, Christian Oraon families continue to take part in Sarhul's spring celebrations and Karma's harvest rites in their cultural, communal form — dancing the Jhumar, tying the Karma branch, gathering as a village — even where individual families understand the day's religious meaning differently from their Sarna neighbours. The dividing line, in practice, is rarely a hard wall between two separate calendars; it is more often a single shared calendar, read with two different theological glosses.

A Shared Political Memory

The previous chapter's account of the Jharkhand movement offers, perhaps, the clearest historical evidence of this underlying unity. The Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj, the Catholic Sabha, and ultimately the Jharkhand Party of 1949 were led overwhelmingly by Christian Oraon and Munda politicians — yet their central, unifying cause was never a Christian cause. It was tribal land, tribal language, and tribal self-governance, pursued in close and effective alliance with Sarna leaders like Bandiram Oraon. When the moment came to fight for a shared homeland, religious identity was set aside in favour of a deeper, prior identity that both sides

recognised as more fundamental — the very identity this whole book has traced back to the Deccan, to Rohtasgarh, and to a single ancestral gene pool. Jharkhand's eventual statehood in 2000 stands as a monument built jointly by both communities, whatever their separate Sunday and Sarhul observances.

Reunification in Practice

In recent years, this underlying continuity has increasingly found organised expression rather than remaining merely implicit. Interfaith family gatherings around Sarhul and Karma, joint Adivasi cultural associations that deliberately include both Sarna and Christian members, and a new generation of Oraon scholars, writers, and public figures who describe their identity first as Kurukh or Adivasi and only secondarily by religious affiliation, all point toward a community actively working — not always successfully, and not without real internal disagreement — to hold its older, tribal unity above the newer, imported line of religious division. Village-level Parha Panchayats in many areas continue to seat both Sarna and Christian representatives without distinction, settling disputes and organising festivals as a single body, much as they have for centuries.

> The honest picture, then, is neither the sunny claim that no division exists, nor the cynical claim that Sarna and Christian Oraon are simply two separate peoples. It is that a genuine, actively exploited political fault line runs across a much older, much deeper, and still largely intact cultural bedrock — one gotra system, one language, one migration story, one genetic inheritance, and, for enormous numbers of ordinary families in Jashpur and across Chhotanagpur, one extended family that happens to pray in two different buildings on any given Sunday and dance the same Jhumar together every spring regardless.

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Conclusion — The Living Archive

What the whole trail, taken together, tells us

Draw every thread of this research together — the sixty-eight totems of the gotra system, the DNA and its AASI heart, the migration route from the Deccan to Jashpur, the fall of Rohtasgarh, the rise and fall of kings, the revolts and the long road to statehood, the arrival of the cross, and the argument over Sarna and Sanatan that closes into an older unity beneath it — and a single picture comes into focus.

The Oraon (Kurukh) people are not simply "a tribal community." They are a living archive of an ancient Proto-Dravidian, Indus-era culture — a people whose language carries the fossil-record of a lost northern Dravidian world stretching from Balochistan to Bengal, whose blood carries the deepest and oldest genetic layer of the Indian subcontinent itself, and whose social memory — the Padha Panchayat, the Dhumkuria, Jani Shikar, the reverence for Dharmesh and the sun, and a system of clan and totem older than any written

law that governs it — has survived monarchy, conquest, conversion, colonial rule, and internal religious division alike, without ever fully surrendering its own root.

Where language and DNA diverge — Dravidian tongue, but a genetic heart rooted in the AASI, the "First Indians" — that very paradox is the strongest proof of how old, and how well-travelled, this people's story truly is. And where history offers no written record of their kings, their own oral songs have kept the memory alive: of a milkmaid's betrayal at Rohtasgarh, of Singi Dai's courage, of a Munda headman's welcome at Sutiyanba, of Christian and Sarna leaders standing together in the Jharkhand Party, and of the founding and tyranny of Jashpur's thrones. This oral memory preserves threads of history that no written archive ever recorded — and it is still being added to, in villages across Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, every time an elder sits a grandchild down to tell it again.

This, then, is not merely a chronicle of one tribe's past. It is the story of how an ancient people, again and again displaced, again and again reorganised, and never once broken — carried its "Kurukh" identity, unbowed, through Rohtasgarh's fall and Jashpur's thrones, through mission and Ghar Wapsi alike, into the present day.

Every family that carries the name Oraon carries some version of this same question, whether or not they have ever put it into words: *who were we, before all of this?* The research gathered in this book does not so much answer that question as widen it — reaching back past Jashpur, past Rohtasgarh, past even the Indus, to a population that walked into this subcontinent tens of thousands of years before anyone thought to call it India at all. And the same journey, remade in every generation since, still carries village-born parents into steel plants and government schools, and carries their children, in turn, into classrooms, hospitals, and studies like the one that produced this very book — just as it once carried a defeated royal family from a burning fortress to a Munda village's open gate.

If this book has a wish buried inside its research, it is a simple one. I hope the Oraon story — Sarna and Christian, village-rooted and city-scattered, Kurukh-speaking and increasingly English-speaking too — keeps choosing, as it has chosen again and again across four thousand years of displacement, to hold itself together rather than let itself be permanently divided: by a colonial border, by a mission and a Ghar Wapsi campaign, by a state line, or by the ordinary drift of a family from a jungle village into a city tower block. I hope for more marriages like the ones already common across the Sarna-Christian line, more grandchildren who learn Kurukh alongside English, more Parha Panchayats that keep including everyone regardless of which building they pray in on a Sunday. I hope, most of all, that the love which held a Patel's court and a Vaidya's clinic together in one man's life — the love of a people for its own — keeps outlasting whatever politics or distance tries to fracture it next.

The migration this book describes did not end at Chhotanagpur, and it has not ended yet. It is a journey still unfolding — carried now not by soldiers and displaced kings but by engineers, schoolteachers, healers, and their curious children, by every Oraon grandchild growing up far from Jashpur who still asks where they truly come from. May that question always find an elder willing to answer it, a community secure enough in its own unity to answer it fully, and a homeland — in the villages and in the cities both — worth the asking.

References and Further Reading

The nature of the material drawn on in this study

This compilation weaves together three kinds of material — academic and scientific scholarship, published regional history, and oral tradition. For the reader's convenience, these are listed here by category. This is not a formal footnoted bibliography, but a set of directions for independent further reading.

Linguistics (Historical & Dravidian Linguistics)

- Comparative Dravidian linguistics and the historical classification of the North Dravidian branch (Kurukh–Malto–Brahui), drawing on the work of Franklin C. Southworth.
- Studies on the linguistic identity of the Indus Valley Civilisation and its possible relationship to the Dravidian language family, associated with Asko Parpola.
- Available linguistic documentation of Kurukh grammar, phonology, and the Tolong Siki script.

Population Genetics

- Research on the genetic composition of South Asian populations — the ASI (Ancestral South Indian), AASI (Ancient Ancestral South Indian), Iranian-farmer, and Steppe components — associated with David Reich and collaborators.
- Genomic studies of Indian tribal populations by K. Thangaraj and colleagues (Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad).
- Readers should note that the specific genetic percentages cited in this document are approximate and drawn from popular-science summaries; for precise figures, the original peer-reviewed papers should be consulted directly.

Regional History and Archaeology

- Documentation of the archaeological chronology of Rohtasgarh Fort from Bihar tourism and Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) sources.
- Colonial-era administrative records connected to the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908).
- District gazetteers and local historical writing on the princely-state history of Jashpur, Surguja, and the wider Chhattisgarh region.

Oral Tradition and Ethnography

- Oraon folk songs, migration narratives, and legends tied to Rohtasgarh and Jashpur — this material rests on the community's own oral tradition and local memory, a source distinct from, but equally valuable alongside, the written record.
- Ethnographic observation of Sarna religious practice, the Dhumkuria institution, and the Padha Panchayat system.

The Gotra (Clan/Totem) System

- **Sarat Chandra Roy**, *The Oraons of Chotanagpur: Their History, Economic Life, and Social Organisation* (1915; reissued 2004) — the foundational ethnography of Oraon social structure, and the source most often cited for the estimate of roughly sixty-eight totemic clans.
- **Edward Tuite Dalton**, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872) — the earliest substantial colonial-era ethnographic record of Oraon clan and village organisation.
- "Tradition of Clan Names and Conservation among the Oraon Tribes of Chotanagpur," *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, Vol. 5(2), April 2006, pp. 224–226 — a peer-reviewed paper documenting specific totem-taboo legends, drawing in turn on Roy (2004), Bonifaca Tirkey's *The Smiling Oraon* (1989), and Pollus Topno's *Chhota Nagpur ke Adivasi* (1984, in Hindi).
- Tribal Welfare Research Institute, Jharkhand — for documentation of the Khunt and Parha Panchayat administrative structure.
- Community-maintained clan registries and local family testimony, which continue to record gotra names and their associated customs in the absence of any single standardised list.

> This document aims to present a coherent, readable compilation rather than an original piece of academic research. Where facts are mythological, folkloric, or contested among scholars, this has been indicated in the text wherever possible. For serious academic use, readers are encouraged to independently consult the original, peer-reviewed sources in the categories listed above.

✦ End of Chronicle ✦

Compiled and Written by **Vineet B. Kerketta**

A note on method: this chronicle draws together oral tradition, folk memory, linguistic and genetic research summaries, and popularly circulated regional histories of Rohtasgarh and Jashpur. Where sources are mythological, folkloric, or contested among historians, this has been noted in the text — these threads (Harishchandra/Rohitashva, the exact identity of "Dharmesh," the precise genetic percentages, and several princely-era legends) remain areas of ongoing scholarly and community debate rather than settled fact.